

CHAPTER 16

The pluricentricity of languages in language education

1. The objectives of this chapter

The task of this chapter is to describe some solutions on how to do language education in pluricentric languages. This is linked to the problem of choosing the 'right' standard for teaching written language in primary school and later in the higher grades, when the norm for prose in essays and other text types is taught. While the dominant nations in a PCL normally don't have any difficulty in the choice of "correct" norms, the problem is unlike more complicated for NDVs. This is particularly the case when the NDV has a explicit diglossic language situation. In this case, children come to the classroom with an everyday language that is linguistically very different from the formal standard language. The children have to learn the formal norm as a second language – a process that is comparable to the language acquisition in many African countries where the language of education is the former colonial language and not the native tribal language. A number of other issues arise when second language teaching in a NDV or abroad is taken into consideration. It is therefore important to define different language teaching situations in order to find the best solution.

2. Different language teaching situations in PCLs ¹

1. Language teaching situation (1): Children who come to school with the general NDV standard and learn to read and write

The basic question here is: "Which standard should be used for alphabetisation? The answer is that the best choice is the general standard of the PCL that underlies the written language as this norm is the common basis among all varieties of the PCL. However, the lexicon taught to the students, should be clearly in accordance with the everyday norm. This should also be the case with the most typical morpho-syntactic features (diminutives, word formation etc.). In this way, the approach avoids that the gap between the primary native language of the children (the everyday norm) and the formal norm they are supposed to acquire is prevented from becoming too wide.

2. Language teaching situation (2): Children who come to school and are bilingual or multilingual speaking another language than the general everyday language of the NDV

In this case, the same applies as already described under point (1). However, with the addition that bilingual teaching of the entire subject matter is the best solution and promises the best learning progress.

3. Language teaching situation (3): Adults or young adults acquiring the language of the pluricentric variety in the country of the target language

This is a typical situation for second language learning with the target language being learned in the country of the target language, which is ideal because learners have many opportunities for direct communication and learning outside the classroom. However, there are some intricacies to be taken into account. It has been noted several times in the preceding chapters that NDVs are often marked by a diglossic language situation. This means that the learner does in fact have to acquire two varieties (at least passively) – the formal standard written norm and the pronunciation based on it and the everyday norm that is used in everyday conversation, as already mentioned in the introduction of this chapter.

The pronunciation conveyed should therefore be based on the pronunciation standard of the media (radio, TV), as this is generally accepted and is usually not overly formal. The pronunciation of the learners should not become too close to the informal everyday standard, as this could lead to stigmatisation outside the country of the learners target language. If the learner stays in the country of the NDV for a longer period of time it will be of course useful to also acquire the pronunciation norms of the everyday variety too in order to show that he/she is integrated. The linguistic production norms should be *supraregional*.

Different from that, the listening comprehension should be based on a wide range of texts from the major varieties of the PCL and, of course, include important supra-regional varieties of the NDV in order to be able to understand speakers from different regions of the target-language country and other varieties of the PCL. The passive listening comprehension skills should therefore be based on the teaching of national/regional texts and realistic reception norms.

The textbooks used for teaching should present the pluricentric language situation and draw attention to the fact that there is more than one standard.² This concerns the presentation of the lexicon, which on the teaching level of A1³ should include the NDV-expressions of the most common lexical items that play a role in daily life at this level. Reference should also be made to parallel

expressions in other (major) varieties. The presented lexical variation can be increased in the later stages of language acquisition (A2, B1, B2). However, the amount of lexical variation should only be increased gradually, first teaching the standard expressions of the NDV, followed by parallel expressions in other national varieties. The presentation of linguistic material in textbooks should be designed to be multinational and multiregional.

In addition to the knowledge of the language, successful communication is also based on knowledge of pragmatic rules and the differences between national varieties. These concern the rules of directness, politeness conventions, speech act rules and others. Learners may experience unexpected difficulties if they adopt a direct style of conversation and use it in other varieties of the PCL with more indirect conversation rules. Saving one's own social face and not offending the other person's face can be seen as an important principle in one national variety, but not in another. This should also be part of foreign language teaching.

4. Language teaching situation (4): Adults or young adults acquiring the language of the pluricentric variety abroad

When language learners are learning the foreign language in their home country and not in the country of the target language, the situation is quite clear: they want to learn a language that can be used universally in any country of the target language and beyond. In most countries, foreign language teaching is based on the teaching materials and the language norms of the dominant variety. This gives learners the illusion that they have learned the "correct" language that will enable them to communicate in all countries where the target language is used. However, in the case of PCLs, this is indeed an illusion as there are linguistic and pragmatic differences between the various NVs that hinder successful communication. Some very basic differences should be taken into account in the classroom in order to achieve an extended communication competence as already mentioned before.

Ever since the communicative turn in language teaching in the 1980s it is axiomatic that not only that realistic situations are presented in the teaching materials, but also that the linguistic substance taught satisfies the criteria of communicative adequacy and pragmatic acceptability. The language used in the textbook must therefore be "genuine" (authentic), otherwise there will be "pragmatic errors" by the foreign language speakers and social disruptions in communication. Learners therefore have a "right" to know about these differences. The aim of this approach is to ensure that foreign language learners are

able to communicate actively on the basis of real contemporary texts.

This leads to a teaching situation that recognises the pluricentricity of the language being learned. This means that the teaching introduces important features of the variability of the target language. In elementary textbooks, the presented linguistic material should be as neutral as possible and should include only variants that play a central role for communication in basic communication situations. Furthermore, text types relevant to everyday life (e.g. housing advertisements) from other NAVs should be offered in parallel and not just those from one country. As already stated under point (3) above, the lexical variability should be increased gradually.

A clear distinction should also be made between productive and receptive norms in pluricentric language lessons. Learners should be able to gradually build up their listening and reading habits on a realistic basis and not be completely lost when they encounter someone whose articulation basis is partly different but still unmistakably a native-speaker. And of course pragmatic rules should be part of the lessons.

To summarise, there are *six principles of pluricentrically oriented foreign language didactics*:

1. Creating multinational awareness of national variants from intermediate level at the latest;
2. Teaching of supraregional production norms in pronunciation and text production;
3. Teaching of national and regional reception norms in listening comprehension;
4. Multinational presentation of linguistic material (lexicon);
5. The principle of geographical proximity to the nearest country that shares the target language as the primary point of reference for norms.
6. Inclusion of pragmatic and conversational rules in order to avoid misunderstandings in communication.

Footnotes:

¹ See Muhr (1993), (1996a) and 1996b).

² This is not always the case. See Huber (2023) for the respective situation of Hungarian text books for German as a foreign language.

³ Council of Europe: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. <https://rm.coe.int/common-european-framework-of-reference-for-languages-learning-teaching/16809ea0d4> [acc. 02.02.2025]